GANDHI, AZAD AND NATIONALISM

by

MOIN SHAKIR

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.MPRADAYIKTA VIRODHI COMMITTEE
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A comparative study of Gandhi and Azad is interesting as well as rewarding to understand the later phase of Indian nationalism which constituted the theoretical foundation of the movement for the independence of the country.

In the freedom struggle no two leaders represent such a great similarity as Gandhi and Azad. They were religious by temperament but wanted to reconcile their religion with reason and science. Their orthodoxy which they inherited was in a way hostile to rationalism. After making a comparative study of religions, they arrived at the conclusion of the fundamental unity of all religions; for them religion was not a dogma but a living principle. They opposed the existence of the British raj but held that the independence of the country was a means for the social, cultural and the economic emancipation of the people. They were equally concerned with the communal harmony in the country. Their religion and politics never undermined the basis of humanism nor did it ignore the vital realities of the human situation.

It is also be noted that while their ideas were rooted in the orthodox view of religion their commitment to the modern democratic values was sincere and real. They spoke in the idioms of Hinduism and Islam but they abhored religious politics and the establishment of religious state.

They used religion for political purposes but never made politics subservient to religion.

Nationalism is the dominant feature of the political thinking of Gandhi and Azad. In order to understand their view of nationalism, a reference to the character of Indian nationalism is essential. Indian nationalism is of recent origin. It has been formulated by those who felt the needs of "revaluation of values" and the discovering of Indian identity vis-a-vis the British culture and civilization. It was a dialectical process as it included at once the revivalist and the reformist attitudes of the Indian mind.

Nationalism in India can, thus, be described as the consciousness and the recognition of the socio-cultural unity in the past. But it was more than a spiritual imperative because it has to operate as a device to letting out the aspiration and the hopes of the educated middle class. The positive contributions of the British raj and the work of the orientalist gave a fillip to it. The earlier nationalists were more concerned with the questions like the cultural backwardness of the people and the progress in the country.

The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 was a great landmark in the history of the growth of Indian nationalism. What went into its making was not only the urge for Indianizing the civil services but also the social and cultural movements of the early 19th century. Pattabhi Sitaramayya rightly says that the Congress was "the organ and exponent of a movement of national renaissance. For fifty years and more before the birth of the Congress, the leaven of national rejuvenation had been at work[1]."

The course of the evolution of the Congress was determined by the ideas and the ideals of its leaders. Its operative basis was, of course, nationalism. Its character remained liberal so long as its leaders professed the notion of the

Providential connection of the British raj and the employment of the constitutional means and method.

This underwent a change when the leaders began to preach extremism. Both liberals and extremists made valuable contributions in strengthening the Congress and nationalism. They had their merits and demerits, successes and setbacks. But it should be noted that under the influence of the liberal and the extremist schools, nationalism came to be understood as a political doctrine of progress. General democratic content was also provided. The aspect of socio-cultural unity was put on political and economic aspects. But the socio-cultural aspect of the history was not discarded.

The outbreak of the First World War, the Indian contribution to the war-efforts, the successful prosecution of the War by the Allies and the promises the British government made to the Indian people constrained the British government to change its approach to the Indian question. This necessitated a constructive response on the part of the Indian leaders. What was required was the blending of the two apparently contradictory principles of liberalism and extremism. A synthesis of these two trends is found in the view of nationalism advocated by Gandhi and Azad.

The development of Indian nationalism was not always coherent and consistent. The liberal nationalism was primarily secular. The confluence of religion and politics in extremist nationalism succeeded in broadening the base of the nationalist movement. Religion and nationalism became almost convertible terms in the speeches and the writings of the extremists. This is true of both Hindu extremism and Muslim extremism.

Although Gandhi and Azad were brought up in an orthodox atmosphere they refrained from joining the extremists. They were impressed by the extremists but

were influenced by the liberals. This has been an enigma for many interpreters of Gandhi and Azad.Their nationalism can, therefore, be described as quasi-liberal and quasi-extremist.

Gandhi's attempt to formulate the theory of nationalism on the basis of certain liberal and extremist principles was deliberate. He was half-liberal, half-extremist. He surely succeeded in striking a new track. It is interesting to note that Gandhi described himself as the true disciple of Tilak but at the same time declared Gokhale as his political guru. What Gandhi borrowed from Tilak was "the love of country and the steady pursuit of Swaraj." Besides, Gandhi was aware that "no one perhaps realized the evil of existing system of government as Tilak did."

Thus the notion of the withdrawal of the British and the awareness of the rotten nature of the alien bureaucracy in Gandhi's ideal of nationalism is the contribution of extremists. But unlike Tilak, Gandhi used religion "in a very subtle way" and his religion was quite free from sectarianism. Gandhi did not look upon Hinduism as a society. P. Spratt says that, "....Mr. Gandhi represents the bourgeois side of national movement, and Tilak the rural, mediaeval side[4]."

It is surprising that Gandhi does not speak of religious orientation of extremist nationalism that he accepted but claims to have derived the principle of spritualization of politics from Gokhale. According to him, the message of Gokhale's life and teachings is to spiritualize the political life and the political institutions of the country. He also learnt from Gokhale that the means for bringing about change in the society should be pure, peaceful and legitimate. They should be based on religion. Without the spirit of religion the political movement would be barren[5].

Gandhi's analysis of liberalism and extremism defies

the popular superficial generalization. Azad's analysis also agreed with that of Gandhi's. Under the influence of the liberals (particularly Sir Syed) Azad came to realise that the British made a tremendous contribution to the Indian political system. In the field of culture their contribution was considerable. But he held that the British connection with India was not providential. Moreover the British rule was not everlasting. This was more the result of dissillusionment with the liberal politics in India than any vigorous influence of extremism on Azad. He observed that the methods of "begging, petitions, waiting in deputation and so on could not be of much avail. We had to try to find some means of exerting direct pressure. But most people fought shy of this line of thinking[6]."

Unlike the liberals, he was not enthusiastic about the issue of social reforms. For broadening the base of the nationalist movement he did not join the ranks of the extremists. He was alive to the hard reality that militant nationalism would lead to religious obscurantism and mysticism in politics and weaken the secular character of the political movement[7]. Azad had come out of the shell of religiosity by abandoning romanticism. Azad, like Gandhi, was under similar compulsions of synthesising the liberal and the extremist doctrines.

Gandhi and Azad were neither atheists nor agnostics. They accepted the utility of religion for political purposes. The view of religion they upheld was not narrow and dogmatic, it was not devoid of justice and equality. To Gandhi, religion "does not mean sectarianism. It means a belief in ordered moral government of the universe. It isn ot less real because it is unseen. The religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christanity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality." His Hinduism was not exclusive: "The Hinduism of my conception

is no narrow creed. It is a grand evolutionary process as ancient as time, and embraces the teachings of Zoraster, Moses, Christ, Mohammad, Nanak and other prophets that I could name."

Gandhi's religion was the religion of truth. He believed that men will be judged only by their actions and not according to the religions they profess. Azad's view of religion is strikingly similar to that of Gandhi; Azad's view of religion consists of unity of God and emphasis on right action. It means unity of man and his actions based upon the eternal truths laid down by all scriptures. The religious philosophy of Gandhi and Azad was rational. They regarded the reasoning faculty in man as the noblest of his faculties. Reasoning; the driving force which leads to an endless vista of progress. It does not clash with religion but draws strength and inspiration from faiths.

This rational view of religion and its incorporation in the scheme of nationalism is a departure from the liberal and the extremist nationalism. Nationalism of Gandhi and Azad is composed of three major ingredients : Swaraj, Communal harmony and non-violence. Although Gandhi's philosophy is based on truth yet it is not mentioned as one of the elements of his nationalism because he himself said that active *ahimsa* necessarily includes truth and fearlessness and non-violence is imbedded in truth and vice versa. One thing more should be made clear. Azad regarded non-violence as a policy while to Gandhi it was a creed. But in the first analysis of the doctrine of non-violence all the differences between Gandhi and Azad disappear.

Under the influence of liberalism, both Gandhi and Azad were not initially anti-British. Azad was definitely a supporter of the British government upto 1905. He admitted that in the entire history of the country, there had been no government which developed so much regard and respect

for the liberties of the people, irrespective of their caste, creed and community. He also expressed his gratitude to the British Emperor for maintaining the independent existence of Islam and to the West for preserving Islamic Arabic literature. But the currents and cross currents inside and outside the country turned him into an uncompromising anti-imperialist.

He also came to realize that Islam and territorial nationalism are not antagonistic. Political Pan-Islamism was nothing short of a misnomer. Therefore, a realistic approach, according to Azad, called for the struggle of all people to destroy the vestiges of imperialism. Gandhi was also the supporter of the British government but he was dis-illusioned with the anti-people repressive policy of the British government. He also arrived at the same conclusion of destroying the fabric of imperialism through the united struggle of all the people.

According to Gandhi and Azad, the basis of united struggle was "common political subjection". Its aim was freeing the people from the tyranny of the alien rule. Swaraj signified self-rule and self-restraint. The British government could not be just and moral because it was founded on exploitation of the masses. It had ruined India economically, politically, culturally and spiritually. Swaraj would not mean change of rulers but it would provide an opportunity for the establishment of justice, liberty and equality for one and all in the country. Justice and slavery could not co-exist. Swaraj would, therefore, ensure the regulation and control of authority by the people. It would be a "healthy and dignified independence".

The content of Azad's Swaraj was mainly political while Gandhi gave equal importance to social and cultural aspects. Gandhi thought that the constructive programme was a part and parcel of the scheme of swaraj. Azad did

not ignore them. He hought that they are implied because in India "every kind of faith, every kind of culture, every mode of living was allowed to flourish and find its own salvation."

Gandhi and Azad did provide economic content to Swaraj. Economic independence meant to them the economic upliftment of every individual by his own conscious effort. They thought that India need not imitate the western model. The roots of the concept of economic independence may be traced in India's religious traditions. They were perhaps aware of the strength of social conservatism. Gandhi, therefore, preferred to call his stateless society as Ram Raj which had nothing to do with Hindu Raj.

Gandhi stood for the welfare of all. His theory of trusteeship is far from clear. It is subjected to severe criticism. It is relevant only in a static and stagnant society. This is in keeping with the Indian temperament. "We are by instinct and tradition averse to revolutions. Traditionally we are slow-going people," said Lajpat Rai. But modern and rapidly changing society cannot be satisfied with this scheme of trusteeship.

Azad, on the other hand, began to consider socialism as a healthy system. He supported the progressive movement in politics and literature. He held that the modern economic system should not approve concentration of the means of production and wealth. Even private property may be abolished in the interest of the nation. It is a question of policy and is not all concerned with religion. To Azad, progressive democracy should control the economy of the nation without being bound by *laissez faire* philosophy. It should not rely on big business for solving the problems of the nation. In Britain and America no fund could prevent the poverty of the middle and the lower middle class. One can conclude that Gandhi and Azad aimed at

the welfare of all but Gandhi enunciated the doctrine which is very much obscure and ambivalent while Azad is comparatively clear.

The second ingredient of Gandhi-Azad nationalism is communal harmony. According to them, it amounts to the active participation of all the communities in the freedom struggle. It also means the unity of the people which should come through religion. What Gandhi and Azad desired was that the religious interests of every community should be well-safeguarded. Love and tolerance should be the basis of harmony. Every religion proclaims the truths of human brotherhood and discards communal and racial prejudices. The Muslim question was part of the ideal of communal harmony.

Gandhi and Azad subscribed to composite nationalism. They did not countenance nationalism based on religion especially in the Indian context of multiplicity as it would divide the people on artificial lines. So Swaraj and strong self-government is not possible without communal harmony. Gandhi and Azad stressed so much on harmony that they considered it dearer than the freedom of the country itself. Every thing should be subordinated to the interests of unity.

Gandhi and Azad were in the forefront of the Khilafat movement. Although the Khilafat was primarily a religious question yet they believed that it would be instrumental in bringing about the unity of the Indian people. It would be the unity of those who professed different religions but considered India their home. Besides, through it, the interests of Hinduism could be protected. And the nationalist movement would become nationalist in the true sense of the word.

Gandhi and Azad were of opinion that pan-Islam was not necessarily anti-Hindu or anti-India. The Khilafat

movement must be supported because it was, in fact, the part of the struggle for the independence of the country. It was a popular anti-British movement which meant strengthening the forces of nationalism. It was a positive step towards the unity of the country. Thus the support to the Khilafat movement by Gandhi and Azad was not a hasty or ill-considered decision. The extremists, like B. C. Pal, also supported the movement in order to save India from the danger of Christian influence.

The Khilafat movement failed to achieve the objects of communal harmony. The concept of unity advocated by Gandhi and Azad was impossible of realization through religion. The problem of communal harmony was more than religious. Gandhi recognized the political and economic dimensions of the problem, particularly after 1930. He stated that the Hindu-Muslim question "centred round a division of political power-spoils of office." Or "the causes of the discord are economic and political and it is these that have to be removed." Azad's religious approach to the communal problem also underwent a change. He observed that necessary assurances for the economic future of the Muslims should be given; since the Hindu-Muslim question is economic in character it cannot be solved without taking the economic aspect into account. He wholeheartedly supported the Bengal Pact of C. R. Das.

According to Gandhi and Azad, the partition of the country would be "harmful not only for India as a whole, but also for Muslims in particular, and in fact it creates more problems than solves." The cry of the tyranny of majority is fictitious. In future India there would be political majority and political minority. The majority would always be a "mixed majority". "The future constitution", according to Azad, "will be framed by the representatives, the Hindus and Muslims will have to think

of their position and interests not as Hindu or Mussalman, but as a peasant or a zamindar, as a labourer or capitalist and so on." The constitution would ensure equality of opportunity and economic freedom. The country, therefore, need not be partitioned.

Still the country was partitioned in 1947. The failure of Gandhi and Azad is evident. They failed to carry conviction even with their own colleagues. Acharya Kripalani says "that Gandhi had not been able to show the way of combating communal strife by non-violence as he had done in the case of fighting the British." The approach of Gandhi and Azad may be lacking in clarity but what is relevant today is its secularism. Both advocated the separation of religion from politics. They also pleaded for making religion a personal affair of the individual. Moreover, even after independence the problem of the minorities poses many difficulties. It should be handled more on political and economic plane than on cultural or religious plane.

Non-violence is the third ingredient of the nationalism of Gandhi and Azad. According to Gandhi, non-violence was the first and the last article of faith. "My marriage to non-violence is such an absolute thing that I would rather commit suicide than be deflected from my position," said Gandhi. He thought non-violence would prevent a bloody revolution and anarchy in the country. It would lead to democracy and not to despotism. It is the law of the human race and is infinitely greater than the brute force. It is not "the weapon of the weak" but "presupposes ability to strike." It is an active force free from weakness. It exercises a sane pressure of love and good-will.

Azad's approach was not very much different. He held that Islam has a message of peace for the mankind. It does not sanction war. *Jehad* does not necessarily imply

warfare but katharsis, quietness and patience. It aims at ending injustice, war and tyranny. He knew too well that the consequences of war are not only cruel but disasterous. It has adverse effects on morality. All the moral virtues lose their value and utility.

To Azad, faith in Islam and love of freedom are synonymous. Taking in view the realities of the Indian situation, Azad did not suggest hostility to the British, but drafted a plan of non-violent non-cooperation. It was characterized by the conviction of unity, righteous action, patience, organization, and the spirit of sacrifice for the cause of freedom. There exists no difference with Gandhi on this question. Interestingly although Gandhi is supposed to be the greatest exponent and the practitioner of non-coperation, the idea did not originate with him. Azad had already come to understand the usefulness of such a programme, Tolstoy had also suggested such a programme in 1901. Hiren Mukherji says that Azad's role in the formulation of that policy was decisive[13].

Unlike Gandhi, Azad described non-violence as policy and not as creed. He maintained that war is permissible to protect the freedom of religion and conscience. If tyranny can be eradicated by war, then war is justified. If the Indians have no alternative they have a right to take the sword. Azad held that Congress must place greater emphasis on the freedom of India than on non-violence as creed. On the issue of support to the British during the second World War Azad said that Gandhi raised an irrelevant issue because Congress was not a pacifist organisation.

Gandhi thought that India should not favour the British even if the participation in the war meant the achievement of India's freedom. Gandhi was a convinced pacifist and the logic of facts could hardly persuade him to modify his position. He was opposed to Cripps' proposals more

on account of his aversion to war than his objection to the proposals as such[11].

Azad's mind was not governed by such a consideration. On many questions, like settlement with the government on the issue of boycotting the Prince of Wales at Calcutta, holding of Round Table Conference and the support of the Japanese vis-a-vis the British during the 2nd World War, Azad openly expressed his disagreement with Gandhi. When the non-cooperation movement was called off, Azad and C. R. Das felt the need of an alternative programme[15]. That such an alternative programme could not be formulated may be attributed to the premature death of C. R. Das. Had such a programme been formulated Azad would have favoured it and challenged Gandhi's leadership. On the basis of such differences Azad could be described as a reluctant Gandhite.

It is pointed out that with Gandhi non-violence was a creed. He termed violence as a brute force. But Azad thought that "opposing of violence with violence is fully in harmony with the natural laws of God in those circumstances under which Islam permits violence." There are many inconsistencies in the Gandhian doctrine of non-violence. He (Gandhi) was aware that absolute non-violence is not possible so long as we exist physically. He also held that inevitable violence cannot be regarded as sin. It is not only permissible but even considered as meritorious. Such statements do introduce an element of contradiction in Gandhi's thinking. The inherent limitations of non-violence are also obvious. His view of goodness of human nature is nothing but pious thinking. He does not take into consideration that "the better side of human nature flourishes on the necessary scale only in favourable conditions." In 1947 he felt that there was some vital defect in his technique and working of non-violence.[17] Gandhi's

notion of non-violence is so flexible that violence and non-violence become convertible terms. Here again, there is a point of agreement between Gandhi and Azad.

The doctrine of non-violence has been severely criticised. But what is ignored in such criticism is the progressive content of the ideology of Gandhi and Azad. Non-violence provided an effective strategy for the struggle for freedom. In that sense it was a progressive force. It could mobilise the millions who saw in it their political, economic and social emancipation. It turned the movement into the struggle of the people of all classes. Philoophically speaking, at may be faulty; but from the point of view of Swaraj, it contributed towards the enrichment of Indian nationalism.

The nationalism of Gandhi and Azad was different from that of the extremists and the liberals. It was not only based on the interests of the people but also on wider knowledge of human affairs. Their nationalism was never chauvinistic or irrational. It was democratic and progressive. It was not a borrowed dogma but was rooted in patriotism. They made it absolutely clear that their fight is against the oppressive bureaucracy and not against the British people. "Hatred is not essential for nationalism. Race hatred will kill the real national spirit....we want freedom of our own country, but not at the expense or exploitation of others, not so as to degrade other communities .... a country has to be free in order that it may die, if necessary, for the benefit of the world[18]", said Gandhi.

To Azad, narrow-mindedness was a "disease." Parochial nationalism, according to him, would be a hindrance to world unity and peace[19]. Thus, internationalism without nationalism is not possible. Nationalism wants to organise itself or find full self-expression for the benefit and service of humanity at large. In this way nationalism is an attempt at the realization of the brotherhood or identity

with the human life.

Indian nationalism is composed of various strands but the contribution of Gandhi and Azad is of profound significance. They played unique role in the national awakening of the people.

The criticism that they possessed a mediaeval mind is wrong. Much better understanding of Gandhi and Azad is possible if their ideas are assessed against the background of the conflict of old and new (in India), East and West, culture and science and the effects of the industrial civilization. In the post-independence era also one finds that the nationalism of Gandhi and Azad is useful as the basis of the efforts of reconstruction of society. It will be a guiding force for the social transformation, achievement of economic independence and the establishment of a secular set up in the country.

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